“Down these Mean Streets a Man Must Go Who is Nether Tarnished Nor Afraid. He Must be the Best Man in His World and a Good Enough Man for any World.”

From “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler on the American Detective

“It’s stuff that dreams are made of”

The Maltese Falcon

“It’s not who you are underneath, it’s what you do that defines you.”

Batman Begins

“I’ll Make Him and Offer he Can’t Refuse”

The Godfather

“If 007 says he saw Derval last night at Shrublands and he was dead, that’s enough for me to initiate enquiries”

Thunderball

“What is it with you people? You think not getting caught in a lie is the same as telling the truth”

Three Days of the Condor

In this course we will look at heroes and villains in American culture and how books, plays, and films of particular genres, including the Detective, the Gangster, and the Spy impacted worldwide audiences- and how great directors, actors, and writers and authors influenced and were influenced by American culture, history, and mythology. We will also look at how classic and popular literature and film reflect our notion of heroes and villains and good and evil the lines that define and blur them: Who we who we are and have become as people- and why good people do bad things and the goodness and compassion of villains in books and film. How has the mythology influenced us and inspired us?

Movies are a true American art form. They have been inspired by and in turn inspired, influenced and shaped American society and culture for over 100 years. By analyzing movies thematically, by topic and genre, we can learn about our own history, goals and vision, and about how specific American archetypes and themes are perceived and articulated- from the rugged individualist in the Old West, to the underdog who perseveres to become the hero in the boxing ring, to the perceptions of government over various decades, to the uncertainty that The Cold War generated that created a generation
of celluloid superspies. The insights gathered and lessons learned from these movies are inspiring, uplifting, and entertaining.

Course Outline:

I. The American Detective - The “Private Eye”

Session 1. Overview, Thursday, September 3.

The session will discuss good and evil in America and the concept of the Hero. Using The Western as a metaphor for The New Frontier - specifically an analysis of the end of the Old West through two films: “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” and “Shane” as the gateway for the three other genres of self-reflection, analysis, and exploration. We will focus on the development of a genre - why a genre is significant to story development - development of themes and subsequent variations on themes. The Hero’s journey and adventure: Our relationship with heroism; heroism as an integral part of cultures. Why mythology is important to a culture: The message of the myth and how artists develop and keep the myths alive. How myths establish societal norms and meet our needs; and heroes and villains - and its significance to storytelling, and the underlying development of character, themes, and story structure.

Reading: 1. The Hero has a Thousand Faces, Introduction, Prologue, and Chapter 1
2. Rousseau's Discourse on Heroes and Heroism (~60 Pages)

Viewing: The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)


The detective as the agent of social order in the world. The person who can see things that other people cannot see and derive solutions and solve crimes and problems with flair and style: Sherlock Holmes and his progeny, including Edgar Allen Poe’s C. August Dupin, Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe.

Reading: A Study in Scarlett, The Redheaded League, The Speckled Band (~60-80 Pages)

Viewing: Excerpts from Sherlock Holmes in Dressed to Kill (1946), Sherlock Holmes 2009, and BBC Sherlock

Session 3. The Detective and Film Noir, Thursday, September 17

The transition from the parlor to the back alley: The detective as the new frontier Dashiell Hammett - The original “Hard Boiled” detectives: Sam Spade, The Continental Op, The Thin Man’s Nick and Nora Charles, and Mike Hammer, and relationships between men and women in the genre.

Reading: The Maltese Falcon, The Simple Art of Murder (~80-100 pages)
Viewing: The Maltese Falcon, The Thin Man


Chandler’s influence on the American voice ("When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it stays split.") An analysis of the development American voice- Farrell, Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, and Chandler, and Chandler’s influence on the genre and on American literature

Reading: Raymond Chandler, Portions of The Big Sleep, Red Wind, and Trouble is My Business, Screenplay: Double Indemnity (~80-100 pages)

Viewing: The Big Sleep, Double Indemnity

PAPER 1 DUE Sept. 29

Session 5. The Contemporary Detective as the Outsider, Thursday, October 1.

The session focuses on the modern detective and contemporary morality, often the outsider, who has to battle the system he or she is part of as well as the villains to attain justice, including Spenser, Bullitt, Dirty Harry, and Jim Rockford

Reading: Robert B. Parker, Early Autumn (~80-100 pages)

Viewing: Gone, Baby Gone

Session 6. Batman- The Dark Knight Detective and Modern Sherlock Holmes and Hamlet as Tragic Figures: The Superhero as American Mythology Thursday, October 8.

This session provides an overview of the heroes and villains, with particular focus on a comparison of two enduring characters- Batman and Hamlet. Both had many and varied incarnations; both are exceedingly troubled young characters who deal with issues of parental loss, darkness, vengeance, and redemption.

Comic books started out modestly seven decades ago printed on pulp paper- there was so much pulp paper at the time, there needed to be a creative use for it. The early stories were geared to appeal to a very young audience. Today, comics have become one of our most enduring archetypes- American mythology, with legendary characters and stories that have transcended time and inspired generations of artists in all different mediums. With movie companies issuing bonds in order to finance the purchase of rights to comic book characters, it has become an international multi-billion-dollar industry.

Reading: Improving the Foundations, Hamlet- selections (~80-100 pages)

Viewing: The Dark Knight

PAPER 2 DUE October 15

II. Wiseguys- The Gangster in American Culture
Session 7. **Early Urban America and its Gangsters Thursday, October 15.**

The session will explore 19th and 20th century immigration patterns and how the rise of criminal organizations based on nationality and religion and the subsequent romanticizing of the gangster in America and the gangster as a tragic figure, including actors who portrayed them: James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, and Humphrey Bogart and an analysis of and comparison to William Shakespeare, who created some of the first tragic gangster characters.

**Reading:** Hero With a Thousand Faces, Chapter III; Excerpts from Julius Caesar and Macbeth (~30 pages)

**Viewing:** Key Largo, White Heat, Angels With Dirty Faces,

Session 8. **The Godfather and its Progeny/The Modern Greek Tragedy- The Development of Modern Tragic Characters, Thursday, October 22.**

The session will discuss and analyze the quintessential gangster film set the tone for not only the genre but for subsequent filmmaking and literature

**Reading:** Mario Puzo, The Godfather (~80-100 pages)

**Viewing:** The Godfather, episodes of The Sopranos

Session 9: **Modern Villains and More Tragic Characters, Thursday, October 29.**

The session will explore the villain in modern film and literature and why the flawed villain is often heroic and finds redemption

**Reading:** Tarantino- Pulp Fiction Script (~80-100 pages)

**Viewing:** Pulp Fiction

Session 10. **The Caper: The Con Man/Picaroon- Living on the Fringe, Thursday, November 5.**

The session will explore the fascination/appreciation of the ingenuity of the well-constructed caper- why do we root for the people to “get away with it?”

**Reading:** Frank Abignale, Catch Me if You Can (~80-100 pages)

**Viewing:** The Sting, Charade

III. **Spies**

Session 11. **Round up the Usual Suspects: The Spy Tradition, Thursday, November 12.**

The spy as the quiet agent provocateur who quietly prevented wars. The history of the Cold War and the artists and their fictional characters who provided intrigue and suspense.
Reading: The Manchurian Candidate (~80-100 pages)

Viewing: Casablanca, North by Northwest, The Manchurian Candidate


Bond, James Bond- the history of longevity of the glamorous spy saving the world in a tuxedo Reading: Ian Fleming: Live and Let Die

Viewing: Goldfinger, Live and Let Die, Man from UNCLE Episode

Session 13. “How Do You Know They’ll Print it?” The Tarnished Warrior/The Modern Spy, Thursday, December 3.

Three Days of the Condor, Jason Bourne, Jack Ryan and Jason Bourne and the new Bond- The modern spy versus not only the villain but the corruption and indifference of his or her own institution

Reading: The Bourne Identity (~80-100 pages)

Viewing: Three Days of the Condor, The Bourne Identity, Spy Game

PAPER 3 DUE DECEMBER 7


Star Trek Network Proposal 1964 (15 Pages)

Viewing: Star Wars- A New Hope, Blade Runner, Twilight Zone, Star Trek episodes

Listening: Joseph Campbell, Power of Myth, 21 Star Wars, 22 Eisenhower and Computers

Class Assignments: Three Papers

1. Paper 1: Select two characters, movies, or television shows from different periods and analyze its/their social significance. Choice one should be a personal favorite and choice two should be specifically out of your “favorite” zone (5-7 pages).

2. Paper 2: Interview an older relative about a book, television show and/or movie that they were influenced or moved by, and/or a program that they shared with their own parents- discuss something you learned about them that you did not know and that they did not know about themselves. Was there any work that connected them to their own parents- and to their political and social ideology? The goal is to connect memory to meaning and establish the evocative and visceral effects of these genres on your own/family life (2 pages).

3. Paper 3: Select a character, book, or film and analyze how it influenced and in turn influenced that period. (12-15 pages).
Topics and source materials should be submitted no later than three weeks before the due date and will be reviewed and discussed individually.

Drafts for Papers 1 and 3 should be submitted no later than two weeks in advance of the due date and will be reviewed and commented on for the following week.

**Grading:**

- Paper 1- 30%
- Paper 2- 20%
- Paper 3- 33%
- Class Participation- 17%

Attendance and class participation will be a factor in the final grade. Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will adversely affect your participation grade. If you cannot make it to class for any reason, you are expected to contact me by email to explain your absence. For religious holidays, please consult NYU policy, and notify me in advance.

Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange **212-443-9999**. Also, academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu)) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**Books:**

1. Joseph Campbell Hero Has a Thousand Faces, paperback (emailed)
2. The Complete Sherlock Holmes, Bantam paperback (emailed)
3. Dashiell Hammett Reader (Library of America)
4. Raymond Chandler: Collected Stories (Everyman's Library)
5. Early Autumn, Robert B. Parker
6. Improving the Foundations, Julian Darius
7. The Godfather, paperback
8. Pulp Fiction Script
9. Catch Me if You Can, paperback
10. The Manchurian Candidate, Richard Condon, paperback
11. Live and Let Die, Ian Fleming, paperback
12. The Bourne Identity, Robert Ludlum, paperback